

Trudeau's Liberal civil service

The mysterious power of the East Block

BY THE LAST POST

The Canadian people have long suspected that power in official Ottawa was not exercised quite the way the textbooks imagined it, that the neat little divisions among Parliament, cabinet, civil service and so forth were not really how the whole thing worked.

PM's power bloc

Speculation has always focussed particularly on the Prime Minister's office where clever, scheming individuals are thought to run the man who runs the country. These suspicions, of course, are firmly grounded in fact. In the 1940's, for instance, Jack Pickersgill had no small influence on his aging boss, Prime Minister Mackenzie King, and in the first days of the regime of Louis St-Laurent, according to Peter Newman (who admittedly has a tendency to hyperbole), "the country was to an astonishing degree run by Jack Pickersgill." In the Lester Pearson era, Tom Kent (who has since gone on to preside over the dying collieries of Cape Breton) was singled out for the same role.

With Pierre Trudeau as prime minister, curiosity about what goes on in the East Block has, if anything, intensified. It has also changed its focus in that it is no longer a single man who is supposed to run the show from behind the scenes (although individuals such as Marc Lalonde and Michael Pitfield do get special attention) but an entire group.

This genre of political analysis is best represented by Walter Stewart's new book on the prime minister, *Shrug*, published this week by New Press. "To all intents and purposes," says Stewart, "Canada is no longer run by Parliament, or the Cabinet, or even the party in power; it is run by the Prime Minister and his own personal power bloc," which Stewart calls the Supergroup.

Understandably, Stewart is now out of favor in the Prime Minister's Office.

Equally understandably, the PMO has become increasingly sensitive about this type of criticism. It has even taken the extraordinary step of responding to it in a paper presented by the prime minister's principal secretary, Marc Lalonde, to the Institute of Public Administration of Canada in Regina in early September.

This document, along with a companion paper on the Privy Council Office (an equally inscrutable advisory organization also operating out of the East Block) by its boss, Gordon Robertson, provides the clearest picture to date of how the prime minister's advisors view their own function.

Power increases

Lalonde agrees that the power of the prime minister has been increasing (he refers to "multi-dimensional growth of the demands made on the Prime Minister in all the roles that he is called upon to fulfil") and that the function of his staff has widened correspondingly ("an unavoidable increase in service support functions" and "a deliberate increase in political advisory support functions").

He is, however, hesitant about discussing at whose expense the accretion of power to the Prime Minister's Office has been. He vigorously denies that it has been at the expense of Parliament and the Cabinet, and attributes it rather to the increasing role of government (no discussion of public administration is complete without mention of the increasing role of government).

However, both he and Robertson provide hints that they believe there is more involved in the changes

Trudeau has made. Here is Robertson explaining why Trudeau has allowed deputy ministers and other senior civil servants to sit in on meetings of cabinet committees.

"The seasoned public servant will recognize that what is at issue are the policies of the government, to be decided by the judgement of the ministers, even though this means accepting gracefully decisions that may be personally distasteful. The advantages in decision-making are clear. There are equally advantages in administration. The exposure of senior officials to the thinking and policy concerns of Ministers helps them to explain to their departments the logic of decisions that might otherwise seem wrong, incomprehensible or 'petty politics'."

It sounds almost like the arguments of an enlightened university administrator for allowing students to sit on the faculty council.

Robertson is a model civil servant and accustomed to being discreet. Lalonde is more direct. Here he describes what he believes the purpose of the growth of the advisory staff in the PMO and PCO to be:

Control to the ministers

"Sensitive and responsive government requires firm political control. It requires that Parliament, the cabinet and the prime minister possess more than mere nominal power to originate and assess policy and to decide on its final disposition. In the exercise of political control, the prime minister must wear many hats as a public figure, statesman, co-ordinator, planner, thinker, legislator and representative. In trying to achieve this important objective, the Prime Minister must have help. Herein lies another principal rationale of the Prime Minister's decision to increase the size of his office.

The Prime Minister's Office is seen as an instrument of establishing political control over the civil service, so that "real and effective decision-making remains the prerogative of politics and not bureaucrats."

Walter Stewart, in his own way, shares this view: "The Prime Minister's counter-bureaucracy is playing hell with the real bureaucracy....Canada's civil service has been, by and large, a good one, firmly rooted in the notion of responsible government. But, not surprisingly, the bureaucrats have begun to withdraw..."

So both Trudeau's friends and his enemies agree that the expansion of the prime ministerial staff is directed, at least in part, at the civil service. The ultimate political responsibility of the civil service is, of course, a concept to which lip service has always been paid (although it has not always worked out so well in practice). But Trudeau's supposed moves in that direction raise as many questions as they answer.

The Liberal civil service

In theory, the civil service is impartial and non-political, faithful to its mission of carrying out the policies of whichever party has been entrusted with power by the sovereign will of the people. In practice, implementation of that theory has been facilitated by the fact that one specific party has been in power for 30 of the last 36 years (the remaining six years, the period of John Diefenbaker's prime ministership, were a time of almost open warfare between the civil service and the government).

The durability of Liberal stewardship has encouraged a certain easy identification between the civil servants and their political masters. When the Liberals came back into power under Pearson in

1963, no fewer than 10 of the new ministers sworn in (including the pm) were former civil servants (as compared to only two of the old Diefenbaker ministers).

This blurring of roles is epitomized in the career of Pickersgill, who came to Ottawa as a junior civil servant, then was seconded by Mackenzie King into a semi-political job in the PMO, then occupied the senior civil service post of clerk of the privy council and secretary to the cabinet (the position now held by Gordon Robertson), then became the most partisan of Liberal MPs and finally disappeared back into the civil service.

We do not have a non-political civil service, we have a Liberal one. And one of the chief sources of the Liberals' ability to stay on top has been, along with its corporate financial base, its base in the civil service. The politics of the mandarins, their cautious, continentalist, Merchant-Heeneys, don't-rock-the-boat liberalism, have been one with the politics of the regime.

If Pierre Trudeau is trying to impose political control on this body, what kind of politics is he trying to impose?

1964 manifesto

Back in 1964, a manifesto appeared in the Montreal intellectual magazine *Cite Libre* (which Trudeau had just wrested back from the untrustworthy hands of Pierre Vallieres) and simultaneously in the Toronto intellectual magazine *Canadian Forum*. Entitled "An Appeal for Realism in Politics" and signed by seven university-based French Canadians, all but one under 35 (the exception was Pierre Trudeau), the document is liberal, optimistic about the possibilities of the technological society, profoundly rationalist in its view of human nature and — what is remarkable for a manifesto coming out of Quebec in the 60's — anti-nationalist.

Some of the demands of the manifesto have been implemented, others (such as full employment) have not, still others have become irrelevant with the passage of time. But it remains valuable as a handy guide to the political thought of the prime minister and his circle.

Which brings us to the second question: as an attempt to impose political control on the civil service, what does this amount to?

Lalonde and Pitfield

Marc Lalonde had been generally accepted as the eminence grise of the Trudeau administration, until columnist Douglas Fisher (who keeps the closest watch on the civil service of all Ottawa reporters) tabbed Michael Pitfield for that position. Lalonde is in the PMO, Pitfield is Robertson's deputy in the PCO and, eminences grises or not, there is a close parallel between their careers.

Responsible to the PM

Their primary identification is with the prime minister, not with the civil service or even the Liberal party — but then Trudeau, who flirted with the CCF in the 1950s and bitterly denounced the Liberals as late as 1963, is rather a late-blooming party man himself.

One wonders whether this was what political control of the civil service was supposed to be all about.

After all, the John Diefenbakers come and go, and so do the Pierre Trudeaus, so even do the Lalondes and Pitfields, but the bureaucracy, massive, irresponsible and self-contained, just keeps rollin' along.



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